

Foreword

Diverse and extensive wetland resources have always been familiar parts of the landscape to farmers, hunters, and residents of eastern South Dakota.

The journals and oral histories of adventurers, trappers, and natives and immigrants reveal how wetlands shaped the wildlife and the people who lived on and modified the land to meet their own needs.

The history of South Dakota wetlands parallels the history and interactions of people and wetlands elsewhere in North America and the world. This interaction can best be characterized as constant conflict. Driven primarily by economics, farmers the world over expended tremendous energy to "reclaim" and "rehabilitate" wet soils and wetlands. Their efforts alerted wildlife biologists, who sounded clear alarms in the 1950s about the loss of wetlands and about what that loss implied for the future of waterfowl and hunting. Eventually, farmers became aware that drainage districts, their costs, and their failures were adversely affecting farm families as often as they helped them.

This report deals with the present. It outlines the true abundance and characteristics of eastern South Dakota wetlands, whether still pristine, modified, or constructed by man. It provides a clear statement of the kinds and

numbers of wetlands and why they are important. It is a foundation for reasoned dialog about the future of wetlands.

The past decade has seen unprecedented public debate about wetlands, with issues of property rights and anti-government sentiment woven in. Underlying this heated public dialog is the knowledge that wetlands have tremendous values, ranging from financial returns to flood control and wildlife habitat. These values become real and measurable in South Dakota. If wetlands are eliminated and the land no longer can absorb excess snowmelt or precipitation, the water overruns the land here and then goes downstream to flood someone else. Constant drainage can kill the golden goose of economic returns from hunting and other recreation. Landowners and biologists are now trying to undo harmful wetland modifications of the past.

The future of many of these wetlands is still to be played out in eastern South Dakota and elsewhere. That future still holds the key to the majestic flights of waterfowl through future wet and dry cycles. Almost a million water bodies of all kinds are present in eastern South Dakota; this report is a powerful reminder of their dominant role in the lives of people and wildlife.

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Beggar ticks are common annual plants in eastern South Dakota temporary wetlands